Backstory: In-Betweens

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A view of Manderley, from the opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's Rebecca *(1940).*

In his Playwright's Perspective, Lucas Hnath explains how director Les Waters once told him about *thin places*. "Oh you know," Les said, "it's the place where the line between this world and some other world is very thin."

The thinness of these thin places suggests that, if you've found your way into one, it might be possible to feel something of *over there* from *right here* – and that it might be possible, under the right circumstances, to tear the veil between them. There's a seeming delicacy to the Thin Place, by virtue of its position in some just-so in-between, and it's a delicacy perhaps easily undone.

But I don't want to speculate further about what thin places might be like – how they work, who can visit. "The less you know, the better," Lucas says. So, instead of spending time with thin places, this essay spends time with three works of art that illuminate a necessary condition of thin places: the quality of *in-betweenness*. I think in-betweens have something to tell us about thinness, about its forms and its functions, which might, in turn, tell us something about thin places. My hope is to get close to them without getting too close. The less we know, the better, after all.

1. *Rebecca*

Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film *Rebecca* brings us to a thin place stuck somewhere in-between reality and memory. Based on the 1938 novel of the same name by Daphne du Maurier, the film revolves around a love triangle between the wealthy and enigmatic Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier); the guileless young woman (Joan Fontaine), never named, who he takes as his second wife following an abridged courtship in Monte Carlo; and Rebecca herself, Maxim's previous wife, who has been dead for over a year. Unlike the monsters of H. P. Lovecraft, which stalk the shadows, or the nightmares of Edgar Allen Poe, which knock at the door, Rebecca never appears – this isn't that kind of horror story. For Hitchcock, the terror isn't in the apparitions but in the traces, the impressions people can leave, even after they've gone.

When Maxim and his new bride – the film's heroine – return to Manderley, his country estate, she soon finds herself in every way eclipsed and outshone by the persistent memory of Rebecca: Maxim seems still enamored of Rebecca ("I suppose she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw," he says, lost in reverie); the household staff seems still attuned to Rebecca's tastes and tempos (her particularity about sauces, her hour for penning letters); the manor seems still filled with her possessions (even her underwear, "made specially for her by the

nuns in the Convent of St. Claire"); and the formidable housekeeper Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), who "simply adored Rebecca," seems still frozen in adoration for "the first Mrs. de Winter."

Manderley, reluctant to let go of Rebecca though a successor has arrived, hovers in-between mistresses. Nothing remains of Rebecca except a gestalt of her former self – a constellation of points so many and so precise that the image they produce is more realistic than the heroine can bear, like a death mask cast in Rebecca's mold, practically breathing though all breath is gone. Shades of Rebecca animate the grounds, the halls, the foyers, surrounding and smothering the heroine from someplace unseen. Her initials – "R de W" – are ubiquitous, claiming stationery, handkerchiefs, and pillowcases. Her most loyal servant doesn't mind at all. "Sometimes," Mrs. Danvers tells the heroine, "when I walk along the corridor, I fancy I hear her just behind me. That quick, light step. I couldn't mistake it anywhere. It's not only in this room. It's in all the rooms in the house. I can almost hear it now. Do you think the dead come back and watch the living?" The heroine begins to weep, her back pressed up against the door. There's no escape. Though Rebecca herself is not present, her presence is beyond doubt.

Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), left, and the heroine (Joan Fontaine), in Alfred Hitchcock's Rebecca *(1940).*

The heroine can't shake Rebecca's reign over Manderley. Nor, however, can she shake the compulsion to act like Rebecca – to become Rebecca, as best she can. The heroine answers Rebecca's phone calls, gives Rebecca's orders, wears Rebecca's gowns. In a particularly unnerving scene, Mrs. Danvers leads the heroine through Rebecca's evening routine – coming home from a party, taking a bath, sitting at the vanity – though tonight, the heroine stands in for Rebecca, a half-willing understudy. Perched on an ottoman with Mrs. Danvers pretending to brush her hair, the heroine is on the verge of tears. It isn't only Manderley that's in-between. It's the heroine, too. She's a substitute, a spare part, a stand-in, and she can feel herself – whoever she is – slipping away. Given that the film never even gives her a name, why oughtn't she take Rebecca?

As Hitchcock proves, thinness applies to more than just places. People can be sheer as gossamer too, wafting in-between *someone* and *someone else*. Manderley and its new mistress alike are arrested in a state of profound ambivalence, being neither one thing nor the other but, as with afterimages or premonitions, containing hints of both. In *Rebecca*, thinness takes the form of superimposition – the photograph together with its negative, layered and laminated.

2. *To the Lighthouse*

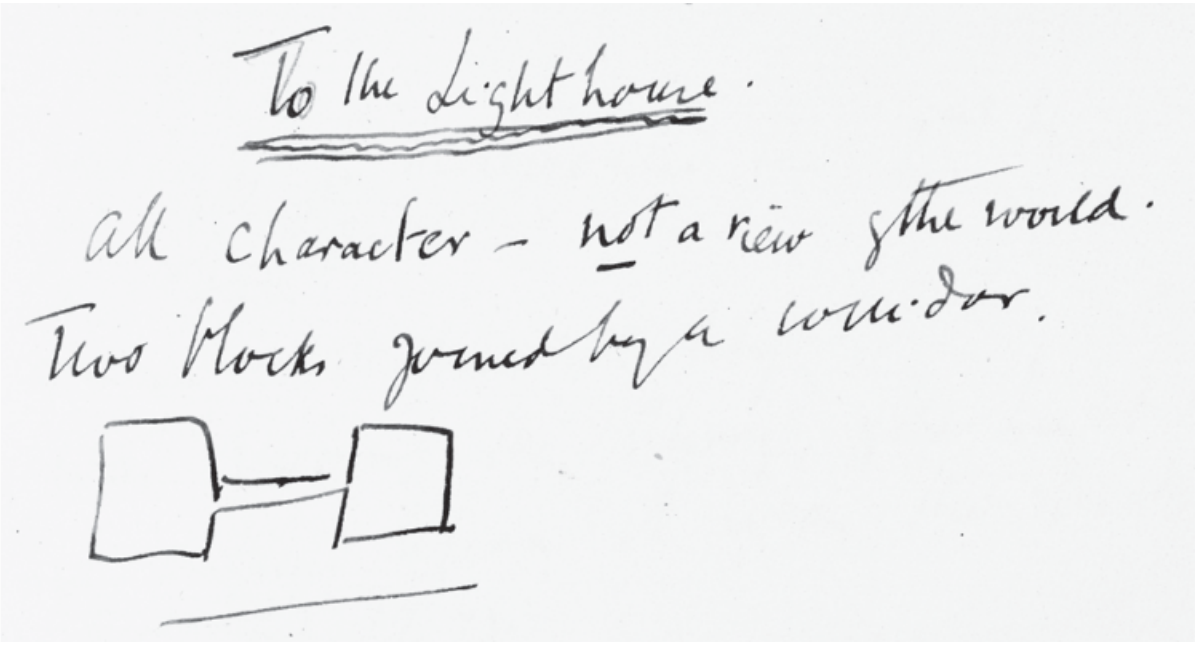
Sometimes, though, thinness looks less like concurrence and more like closeness. That is, in-betweens don't always contain multitudes the way that Manderley hosts both past and present or the film's heroine plays both self and other. As Virginia Woolf reveals in her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, in-betweens can refer to the neutral space – or time – where these multitudes meet. In other words, if for Hitchcock thinness operates like a palimpsest – like a piece of parchment that's been written on, then partially erased, then written on again, showing both the old and the new at once – then for Woolf thinness involves proximity, stopping just short of overlap.

A novel in three parts, *To the Lighthouse* follows an ordinary Victorian family over a period of ten years. The Ramsays make two trips to a lighthouse near their summer home on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, once before the Great War and once after the war has ended. Part I, "The Window," chronicles the first trip, a boisterous expedition to the lighthouse when the eight Ramsay children are young. The mood of Part I is brisk and buoyant. "The Window" flutters after the Ramsays and their guests – a small coterie of painters, poets, and botanists – like a hummingbird, sprightly and spirited. While the short-tempered Mr. Ramsay,

a philosopher, frets over his academic failings, the gentle Mrs. Ramsay hopes that some of the friends who've joined them will fall in love and marry. Part I is all longings and epiphanies, little quests and sudden raptures.

Part III, "The Lighthouse," recounts the family's second trip to their summer home in the aftermath of World War I. This time, the visitors are diminished – not only in number but in strength and stature as well. Their return to Scotland feels frail, subdued. The guests are almost at a loss for what to do with themselves, let alone with each other – Mr. Ramsay looks, Woolf writes, "like a king in exile." Nevertheless, moments of relief and even delight rise out of the wreckage of a difficult decade come and gone. Like a cobweb, Part III catches everyone's blurry impressions and cursory recollections, the distressing memories as well as the dawning visions.

Part II, "Time Passes," is different. Part I and Part III are, Woolf explains in her notes, "Two blocks joined by a corridor." Part II is that strange passageway in-between. While Parts I and III deliver plot and character in keeping with what novels generally look and feel like, Part II strays from the conventions of the genre. "Time Passes" offers neither plot nor character, at least not in the usual way. This section lingers at the Ramsays' vacant summer home, offering an otherworldly view from nowhere of the house itself as it weathers the long years. Woolf shows us the lengthening nights, the silent airs swirling through cracks and keyholes, the lost socks and dried dahlias and old bureaus swallowed up by darkness, the slow arrival of spring. These are the things no one sees – things forgotten, things foreseeable, things so unimportant as to be practically unthinkable, that is, almost not worth thinking at all. Part II bears witness to an empty place where nothing much happens except, as Woolf puts it, "the flight of time."



A sketch from one of Virginia Woolf's notebooks, titled "Notes for writing," from Appendix A of Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, The Original Holograph Draft, *transcribed and edited by Susan Dick (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982)*

With its devotion to trifling lacks and absences, Part II already marks a significant departure from Part I and Part III. But Woolf goes further. Every so often, she punctuates the creep and bustle of "Time Passes" with short passages set off by brackets. This section that is itself an in-between, connecting the *ten years ago* of "The Window" to the *ten years later* of "The Lighthouse," contains in-betweens of its own. At the end of the third chapter of Part II, for example, we hear of the nights and the trees and the seas in wintertime, blustery and bleak. We see some figure rising from his bed to walk alone along the shore, seeking answers to his doubts. Then, at chapter's end, this bracketed image:

> [Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]

The passage returns us to the characters we knew from Part I. But they appear only to disappear. The next chapter immediately picks up again with the empty house, with its interminable creaks and groans, as if Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay had not just burst into view. The brackets signal a moment of rupture, cracking the surface of what otherwise, in Part II, amounts to still-life portraiture.

The bracketed passages recur intermittently throughout "Time Passes," often bringing news of the deaths that the Ramsay family endures during the ten years between "The Window" and "The Lighthouse." But, like telegraphs or headlines, these reports are as terse as they are abrupt. Beloved Mrs. Ramsay is the first to die, but the single sentence that says so begins with her husband instead of with her. Mrs. Ramsay's passing is unceremoniously buried in an airless clause – that is, inside an in-between (the clause) inside an in-between (the bracketed passage) inside an in-between (Part II). Announced as if by happenstance, with such gross understatement, her death is made to feel incidental, like an afterthought or a footnote. A reader might miss it altogether.

The cursory mention of Mrs. Ramsay's death is unnerving perhaps because it gestures at the insignificance of having ever lived, if in fewer than ten words she can be gone. Yet the brevity of the report intensifies the cavernous, echoing objectivity of Part II. "Time Passes" is fundamentally distinct from Part I and Part III. Its commitment is neither to the chatter of the mind nor to the sundry humiliations of friendship and marriage, but to the inexorable march of time and the rare events that buffet its progress. Mrs. Ramsay dies, and Mr. Ramsay opens his arms, grasping for nothing.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the thing that's thin – the thing that's barely keeping other things from touching – is Part II, "Time Passes." Unlike Manderley, it's not a haunted manor. And unlike the heroine of *Rebecca*, it's not a person on the verge of splitting in half. "Time Passes" is thin in another way. It's a narrow cavity that holds apart two incommensurable realities. The world of "The Window" and the world of "The Lighthouse" cannot intermingle – too much has happened, death most of all. "Time Passes" is the only possible go-between, a sibyl who alone can translate the past into the future.

3. *Emma*

If for Hitchcock the in-between is a twilight zone, and for Woolf the in-between is a conduit, then for Jane Austen in-betweens are coils, full of energetic potential, storing momentum for eventual discharge. The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls the "in-between," simply, an "interval." But for Austen – whom the *OED* credits with one of the earliest recorded uses of the word – there's far more to it than just a pause or a gap. In her 1816 novel *Emma*, the eponymous heroine Emma Woodhouse – a young lady "handsome, clever, and rich" – finds herself at one of her father's dinner parties. This evening, the circle of guests happens to include Harriet Smith, who Emma has long hoped to meet. Emma watches Harriet closely all night long, noticing not only her fine looks (thankfully they were "of a sort which Emma particularly admired") but also her pleasant manners, elegant carriage, and excellent taste. "Encouragement should be given," Emma concludes; she sees that Harriet shows promise, so, all nobility and goodwill, she resolves to take Harriet under her wing. (In the 1995 rom-com *Clueless*, this is the moment when Cher Horowitz adopts the "tragically unhip" new girl at school.)

An illustration, "Emma was not sorry to have such an opportunity of survey," by Hugh Thomson for an 1896 edition of Jane Austen's Emma, *first published in 1815, from The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group*

Here, at Mr. Woodhouse's party, is where we catch a glimpse of the *in-between*. Austen puts it like this: Emma "was so busy in admiring [Harriet's] soft blue eyes, in talking and listening, and forming all these schemes in the in-betweens, that the evening flew away at a very unusual rate." For Emma, the in-betweens are lulls of inwardness festooned with flurries of "talking and listening." In a way, they are throwaway moments, non-events – quiet and quite secondary to the festive goings-on. Yet, as the novel quickly makes clear, Emma's new project (her new protégé) is the engine that merrily propels this comedy of manners to its conjugal conclusion. The "schemes in the in-betweens" are of real consequence for Emma and Harriet: both women only come to realize their romantic destinies

through the intrigues that follow from this evening of their first acquaintance. Bubbling with possibility and promise, these in-betweens are far from trivial. Without them, there would be no *Emma*.

As Austen shows, pockets of time can be paper-thin, flanked on either end by happenings of all sorts. For Emma, this kind of thinness – the airy unreality of fleeting instants – arises in the ebbs and flows of conversation from one minute to the next. Unlike the uncanny trials of *Rebecca* or the solemn center of *To the Lighthouse*, the in-betweens of *Emma* are quite commonplace. We encounter them every day.

The thin place in Lucas's play is special, even spectral. But thinness itself is less so. It's just that we don't often notice it, this next-to-nothingness that's all-over, that's here and there and back again. It's so subtle a texture of our lives that it can be difficult to feel at all, let alone to escape.

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